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Thinking Outside the Classroom: Alternative Schools in New England

I think we can all agree that public schools aren't for everyone. The seedling of this thought was first planted in the 1980's, when the now famous assessment entitled "A Nation at Risk" was published. It sounded the alarm and declared that American students weren't performing as well academically compared to their peers in other nations. This was declared to be highly disastrous, as it was to surely result in America losing its spot as a world superpower. This would, in turn, create a substantial economic depression and perhaps even a potential war ("A Nation at Risk", 1983). These fears prompted policy makers to explore why much of America's student body wasn't succeeding academically in traditional public school settings. As a result, a huge emphasis on measuring and increasing students' achievement came into play, and the era of high stakes standardized testing was born (Fletcher, 2009). However, at the same time, alternative schools began sprouting up.

Alternative schools arose for several different reasons, one being that public schools were perceived by some people as a government monopoly which would only improve with the introduction of competition. The thought was that, once competition was introduced, public schools would naturally start improving themselves (Arsen, Ni, 2014). Another reason was that parents wanted their children to receive the highest quality education possible, and they felt that this was not always possible in public schools due to overcrowding, underfunding, and a lack of resources. Such parents also felt that the teachers in public schools were often unprepared, underpaid, and overworked for the huge obstacles they faced on a daily basis. Alternative schools had different curriculum and unique structure. Some placed an emphasis on a particular area, such as the performing arts, agriculture, or athletics. Others emphasized the importance of teaching children to have good manners and requiring students to wear

school uniforms. Many students flourished in these schools, most likely because they featured more resources and smaller class sizes, which meant more individual attention for students who might not normally receive it in a larger, traditional public school classroom (Arsen, Ni, 2014). Moreover, there's also something to be said about giving students choices, which is a driving force in many alternative schools. Many education theorists believe that giving students more autonomy and choice in terms of what curriculum is being presented to them improves their learning experience (Armstrong, 2017).

Today, there are a myriad of different types of schools. As illustrated in our presentation, there are specialty schools for students with disabilities and mental health issues. There are schools that have a philosophy which underscores the value of lots of practical, experiential learning which may involve things like learning how to cook, caring for different types of animals, learning how to survive if lost in the wilderness, and much, much more. Additionally, there are highly structured schools, such as religious schools, military schools, and secular private schools. In these schools, one of the main focus is usually moral and/or religious instruction. Then, of course, there's homeschooling, an option for parents who feel like they can provide the best education possible for their child themselves. So what does all this mean in terms of where the American education system is going? Alternative schooling may be an opposing force to high-stakes, competition-driven public schools. However, this is not to say that one type of school is better than the other: in the end, it all depends on the student and his or her needs and best interests. It is important that we as educators ask ourselves what we can do to help our unique students succeed, no matter what type of school we are working in.

Now let's think in terms of educational philosophy. For pragmatists and existentialists, alternative schools can be ideal. These types of schools are typically centered around experiential and student-directed learning, which is consistent with each of the aforementioned philosophies. Many alternative schools also offer students choices, and are highly flexible based on students needs and interests. Not surprisingly, students attending alternative schools typically gain a sense of ownership

over their education that they may not achieve in a public school setting (Aronson, 1995). With this sense of ownership, students will hopefully take the initiative to further their schooling and take it to new heights, driven by self-discovered interests and intrinsic motivation.

Moreover, pragmatism places focus on change and its importance within the world, encouraging students to “understand what it means to know” versus simply understanding age-old “truths” (Johnson et al., 2014). Consequently, pragmatism encourages the implementation of interdisciplinary curriculums, which are commonplace in many alternative schools. Likewise, existentialism places focus on interdisciplinary curriculums, and “knowing as a personal reflective process” (Johnson et al., 2014). Because the ultimate purpose of existentialism is to allow students to make meaning out of their individual lives, the choice, freedom, and opportunities for students to define themselves found within alternative schools meet many of the existentialist values.

Finally, a cornerstone of both pragmatism and existentialism is the establishment of a safe and inclusive learning environment in which students work collaboratively with each other as well as with their teachers--both philosophies have defined the ideal school as a “community of learners.” Similarly, in her article on “Successful Program Characteristics [of alternative schools],” Stacy Aronson lists a “sense of community”, “warm, caring relationships” and “expanded teacher roles” as essential components towards building a successful school culture within an alternative school (Aronson, 1995). Teachers who work in alternative schools “choose to teach in [these] schools” and, in a Minnesota study, 73% of teachers interviewed responded that they experience “much more” job satisfaction since working in an alternative school (Lange & Sletten, 1995). Thus, it is important to keep in mind that teachers should consider their own personal philosophies of education before applying to work in alternative school--it’s all about finding the right fit, and a teacher who has strong pragmatist and/or existentialist beliefs may find him or herself fitting in very well in many alternative school communities where s/he can take on expanded roles, become increasingly involved in a unique learning community,

and act as a facilitator to help students become active, questioning, and self-discovering members of the school and outside community.

Some alternative schools, however, fall on the other side of the philosophical spectrum. For example, private Catholic schools lean towards the philosophies of realism and idealism. These philosophies state that the purpose of education is to introduce children to values and concepts that are objectively true, and to encourage them to think logically and scientifically about their world and beliefs. Realism and Idealism may seem strange bedfellows, and in fact many would go so far as to say that they are diametrically opposed to one another, yet they can be united into one cogent philosophy, and indeed they have been. Scholastic educators acknowledge a simple truth about the world. Existence is not a single entity, but a duality. There is both the inner life, composed of the eternal, orderly, and beautiful qualities of man, i.e. the Platonic worldview, and the outer world which it is possible to experience, and quantify objectively, as Aristotle proposed. Educationally speaking the subject matter is split neatly between the two philosophies. The Humanities: literature, art, history, and language, the tools by which human beings quantify their experiences, belong to the idealist point of view. The STEM fields: Sciences, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics, belong to the Aristotelian or realist worldview. While these two categories are disparate they are bound together by a central core of logic, and the pursuit objective truth. The end goal of scholasticism is to impress upon the pupil the existence of objective truth, and to arm him with logical thought and experimentation as tools by which to experience and examine the universe. This type of education is most prevalent within Catholic schools, which isn't surprising given that they were united under a Catholic Christian framework by Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica*. This basis for the classical education remains a strong influence on modern schools.

Because our group members have a range of personal philosophies when it comes to education, each of us was able to approach the topic of alternative schools in a unique way while also having an

opportunity to learn of each other's perspectives and how they can be applied to the concept of alternative schools. For those of us who fall more towards the existentialism/pragmatism end of the spectrum, we feel that working in an alternative school could be great fit for us as teachers in terms of having the freedom and flexibility to guide our students through an educational journey of self-discovery, hands-on learning, and problem solving. For those leaning on the idealism/realism side of the spectrum, content-specific schools (such as religious schools) may be perfect places to teach.

In the end, School Choice remains a contentious issue, along with student performance, teacher efficacy and the larger framework of various theoretical curricula that present themselves as problems that must be addressed. "A Nation at Risk" offers a dire picture of a failing educational system based on an analysis of objective data. While it is inevitable that the general public's attitude towards alternative schools will remain in dispute, at least until misconceptions surrounding alternative schools are alleviated and our nation can come to an agreement that one size *does not* fit all, it is part of our responsibility as educators to promote the fact that all students learn differently, and sometimes it is necessary for the school to fit the student, and not vice-versa.

Works Cited

Armstrong, T. (2017, February 08). 5 Ways to Use Student Choice to Improve Learning. Retrieved April 04, 2017, from <http://www.edweek.org/tm/articles/2017/01/17/5-ways-to-use-student-choice-to.html>

This resource explores the ways in which giving students choices improves their education. Giving students the opportunity to choose what topics they learn about, what kind of projects they create, and what kind of texts they read all help students love learning.

Aronson, S. R. (1995, December). Successful Program Characteristics. *Insights on Educational Policy, Practice and Research*, vol. 6. Retrieved from <http://www.sedl.org/policy/insights/n06/3.html>.

This resource is incredibly helpful in that it breaks down all the characteristics of a successful alternative school and places them into four overarching categories: school culture, organizational structure, curriculum and instruction, and system-wide features. It is clear and concise and provides a good picture of what makes an alternative school different from traditional public schools. It also discusses the differences between short-term and long-term alternative programs and the pros and cons that come along with them.

Arsen, D. D., & Ni, Y. (2014, August 16). Shaking Up Public Schools With Competition. Retrieved April 04, 2017, from <http://www.aasa.org/SchoolAdministratorArticle.aspx?id=19606>

This resource examines how competition and school choice impacts public schools. Public schools were once considered to be a government monopoly, and as a result a variety of different types of schools were created. This research in particular focused on how school choice affected students in a study that was conducted in Florida.

Fletcher, D. (2009, December 11). Standardized Testing. Retrieved April 04, 2017, from <http://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1947019,00.html>

This *Time* magazine article gives a brief history of standardized testing in the United States.

Johnson, J. A., Dupuis, V. L., Musial, D., Hall, G. E., Gollick, D. M. (2013). *Foundations of American Education*. (16th Edition). Allyn and Bacon: Boston, MA.

The textbook for our course dedicates a chapter to the four different philosophies of education, which are worth considering in relation to alternative schools. Not all schools will be driven by the same philosophy, and the mission, structure, and demographics of the school depend largely on the educational philosophies in which they embody. Teachers should be aware of the different philosophies before accepting a job at a school, particularly an alternative school.

Lange, C. M., & Sletten, S. J. (2002, February). Alternative Education: A Brief History and Research Synthesis. For full text: <http://www.nasdse.org/forum.Htm>.

This 2002 research report by Cheryl Lange and Sandra Sletten provides an overview of the many components of alternative schools, including history, demographics, structure/organization, academic and personal student goals, dropout prevention, methods of policy and practice, and the stigma that some students face for attending alternative school. The article also touches on areas within alternative schools that need more research, such as program character and special education services.

Lange, C.M., & Sletten, S.J. (1995, September). Characteristics of Alternative Schools and Programs Serving At-Risk Students. For full text: <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED392204.pdf>.

This article focuses on alternative schools specifically in Minnesota, but the research findings can be applied to other states. The article deals primarily with at-risk students as well as those students in special education programs and how these students respond to alternative programs, focusing on the distinctive characteristics of the programs. The study also used teacher input to help feed their data, which is useful information for those going into education and considering teaching at an alternative school.

A Nation At Risk. (1983, April 19). Retrieved April 04, 2017, from <https://www2.ed.gov/pubs/NatAtRisk/risk.html>

“A Nation at Risk” is an incredibly valuable resource. Published by the United States government in 1983, it declared that American students were falling far behind their peers around the world in

terms of their academic achievement. It prompted the creation of high stakes standardized testing and the creation of a variety of specialty schools.

Elizabeth, Mary. "Public Schools vs. Charter Schools." *Education Bug - a Complete Listing of Educational Resources*. N.p., n.d. Web. 04 Apr. 2017.

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Delisio, Ellen R. "Education World: Department of Defense Schools: Their Secret Weapons for Success." *Education World: Department of Defense Schools: Their Secret Weapons for Success*. N.p., n.d. Web. 04 Apr. 2017. <http://www.educationworld.com/a_issues/issues349.shtml>.